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ABSTRACT

In 1989, a 1-week summer workshop involving faculty from the Community College of Philadelphia (CCP), and LaSalle and Temple Universities (Philadelphia) was held to discuss student transfer bewteen institutions with special emphasis on the rate of successful enrollment and transfer of minority students. CCP coordinated this first workshop, assembling a total of 30 faculty representatives from the three schools. Workshop organizers argued that if faculty across colleges developed a sense of common classroom practices, this would eventually percolate up to the administrative levels where articulation agreements are hammered out. As an outgrowth of the workshop, six working groups were formed in fall 1989 representing the disciplines of physical science, history, math, English, social sciences, and foreign languages. A total of 40 faculty members from the three colleges participated in five 2-hour meetings held for each discipline. The content of these discussions was more specific than during the summer 1989 workshop, covering issues of course syllabi, the nature of exams and writing assignments, appropriate reading materials, sequencing of courses, and criteria for mathematics literacy. These meetings were held in preparation for a 2-day conference planned for the following spring. The conference, held in April 1990, brought together 150 educators from two- and four-year institutions from across the state. The workshops and discussion groups, shaped by the members of the original six disciplinary committees, focused on course content and classroom teaching. (GFW)

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# GENERATING FACULTY DIALOGUE ACROSS COLLEGES
## A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Barry L. Grossbach

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***Attention to transfer as a teaching and learning issue makes tremendous demands upon faculty at two- and four-year institutions. The following is an account of one effort to build faculty conversations among three institutions, Community College of Philadelphia, Temple University, and LaSalle University, in Philadelphia, PA during 1988-1990. Dr. Grossbach describes the nature of the tasks to be undertaken, the patience, and the hope that are needed to enhance transfer in urban schools. Dr. Barry L. Grossbach is Professor of History and Chair of the Department of History/Philosophy at Community College of Philadelphia.***

***Judith S. Eaton, Director***
***NCAAT***

## Generating Faculty Dialogue Across Colleges

## A Personal Experience

Barry L. Grossbach

### How To Begin

In the summer of 1988, I received a phone call from the Dean of the Social and Behavioral Sciences at Community College of Philadelphia that would reshape my professional orientation for some time to come. Since 1965, I had been a member of the history faculty and sometimes chair of a combined history/philosophy department, and took particular satisfaction in my classroom function as an "enlightened" educator. Outside of the college I was active in a variety of community organizations that demanded a considerable amount of time and energy. I prided myself on knowing

how much I could take on, both professionally and personally, without sacrificing quality. My commitments were well in place by the time the Dean's phone call came, and my initial silent response was one of muted hostility. My plans for the fall were in place; complications were not welcome.

Community College of Philadelphia had received a Ford Foundation grant that, among other things, called for establishing dialogue among faculty and administrators from two- and four-year colleges and universities in hopes of facilitating the transfer process for community college students. Of particular interest was the rate of successful enrollment and transfer of minority students--a population whose percentage in both categories had shown a decline. Somehow this cross-institutional dialogue might provide a forum for discussing these issues, and might, additionally, make articulation agreements easier to reach. Someone had to go out and round up the participants for these discussions. I was offered released time to take on this task without a discernible roadmap to serve as a guide.

The next two years required considerable invention and creativity on my part. The Ford grant had a number of components to it, but trying to explain that to potential participants made no sense. I had difficulty digesting what precise commitments the grant implied, so it became necessary to find a particular focus and run with it. Clearly, there was a strong belief that faculty dialogue across two- and four-year colleges would produce a realization that common problems existed regardless of the institution. Further, if faculty across colleges developed a sense of classroom practices and activities, that knowledge would percolate up to administrative levels where articulation agreements were hammered out. The key, then, was to identify appropriate and willing faculty and bring them together for a one-week summer workshop in 1989. With stipends available as inducements, I was asked to set sail on an uncharted course.

The project, initially, had called for the involvement of a larger number of colleges than the three schools that actually participated. It seemed more desirable to target those institutions that received the largest number of transfers from CCP, so Temple and LaSalle universities in Philadelphia were logical choices. Both schools had recently implemented revised core curricula for general education, and Temple had just mandated a one-year "Intellectual Heritage" course for every student at the university. The community college had a clear obligation to familiarize its students with requirements at transfer colleges. Even more, it had a pressing need to discuss with those institutions the nature of its own general studies reform effort that was currently under way. This, then, became the logical "lead in" for identifying faculty and defining the objective for subsequent discussions; in short, how CCP's efforts at reforming general studies compared with the revised general education curricula at the two institutions that received the largest number of our transfers. A word about general studies at CCP. Reform at CCP has not

come easily. Most everyone expressed dissatisfaction with the current general studies curriculum and its open-ended possibilities that gave new meaning to the phrase "lack of direction." A faculty debate covering some fifteen years and involving people on all sides of a potentially explosive issue finally resulted in a decision to form a curriculum based on courses that stressed critical thinking and inquiry through use of primary texts and extensive writing. Monies were committed by the college's Board of Trustees for faculty workshops and, as a result, a number of disciplines produced courses using such an approach. While the process is not yet complete, and hard choices are still ahead in mandating "required" courses for the general studies curriculum, it is fair to say that pedagogy and not departmental or disciplinary interests has been the driving force behind the curriculum reform effort to date.

Certain disciplines were engaged in course redesign in the fall of 1988 at CCP. It seemed logical, therefore, to focus on similar academic areas in selecting faculty from Temple and LaSalle. Identifying areas proved no problem; selecting thirty faculty for a week-long discussion seemed a more daunting undertaking. Aside from finding willing faculty who would feel comfortable in give-and-take conversation, it was important to select individuals with proper "ego control" in order to guarantee a tolerable week for all. Most importantly, it was necessary to move quickly before summer travel and research plans made participation impossible.

**The First Year**

A decision was made to identify faculty from Temple and LaSalle before tackling the more divisive issue of the CCP participants, since the latter discussion would simply mirror the internal debate over general studies. Knowing few faculty at either institution, I decided to contact those administrators most directly involved with the recent curriculum reforms for initial suggestions. Explaining Ford's interest in establishing faculty discussions across colleges as a mechanism for enhancing transfer, and suggesting those areas that would most mesh with CCP reform efforts (English, history, music, math, the social sciences and the natural and physical sciences), I asked for help in identifying possible participants. The Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at LaSalle solicited interest from his faculty and provided me with a list of respondents from a variety of disciplines. At Temple I relied on a professor of mathematics and director of the core curriculum for initial suggestions. My "deep throat" contacts at both colleges would eventually prove instrumental in putting together a collection of faculty interested in teaching strategies that would prove reasonably compatible.

My procedure was simple. Identify faculty and track them down in their offices. That could, and often did, take a week or two. A quick telephone explanation of the project was followed by my request for an appointment. With luck, I could set up two or three sessions on the same day and, thus, expedite the process. I had no idea what to expect in the

way of a reception. Would faculty from four-year schools have any interest in talking with community college faculty, or with each other for that matter? My concerns quickly vanished as I made my rounds of Temple and LaSalle offices. While I was there trying to sell faculty on the desirability of participating in this enterprise, many of the faculty at Temple and LaSalle tried to sell me on why I should select them! The bottom line--everyone thought it was a great idea to get faculty together and to discuss issues that actually focused on the classroom experience. By the spring of 1989, a group of thirty faculty (12 from Temple, 8 from LaSalle, and 10 from CCP) plus the workshop leaders were in place. As far as I was concerned, my task was nearly done. All that was left was to make certain everyone had a decent lunch.

**Bringing Faculty Together**

Having faculty from different institutions meet in a week-long seminar might be deemed a success in its own right. The response of the participants, however, proved decidedly upbeat. Most had not had an opportunity to talk with faculty from other colleges in any sustained way. In fact, the seminar provided an opportunity for some faculty from the same school to meet one another! Introductions aside, the conversation centered initially on the nature of the respective institutions, particularly the characteristics of the individual student bodies. Faculty from Temple and LaSalle seemed eager to reassure those of us from community colleges that their students were hardly better prepared than ours, and that distinctions between two- and four-year schools were somewhat overblown. Finally, acknowledging that students at two-year schools were, for the most part, less well-prepared when entering college, and that community college faculty out of necessity plowed their energies into introductory courses as opposed to advanced ones, the issue of the "two-year versus four-year college" seemed to be put to rest.

From my perspective, just having faculty from different colleges sit around and engage in civil conversation would have accomplished the goals of the Ford grant. But it was necessary to spell out more succinctly what would transpire over the course of the week. In a preliminary mailing, the workshop leaders referred to the summer institute as an opportunity "to enrich articulation agreements" among the colleges by examining the nature of the transfer problem. They also suggested a concern with the "cognitive demands of the classroom" and a desire to reach general agreements about "academic expectations," particularly the role of writing and primary texts. Accordingly, faculty were encouraged to bring in samples of writing assignments and/or exam questions that could serve as vehicles for discussion.

This is not an attempt to characterize or summarize the discussions of the May meeting; rather, it is an attempt to describe a "process" by which faculty from different institutions found themselves together for a week-long conversation that ranged from issues of student preparedness and

transfer to microscopic examinations of the intent and desirability of certain writing assignments. The meeting itself is the main story, for it provided an opportunity for faculty to talk with one another and to shatter some of the stereotypical distinctions in many minds about community college instructors. By the end of the week, when everyone gathered to discuss "where to next?", I sensed that the original intent of this project had been realized. Get faculty from two- and four-year colleges together in a conversation about teaching, and the commonalities in experience will far outweigh any differences.

Not everyone, to be sure, labeled the meetings an unqualified success. One participant felt the seminar to be "unfocused" and a "waste of time" for "sophisticated people," yet at the same time acknowledging that it was enjoyable to meet new people and get together with one's own colleagues in "unusual circumstances." More typical were responses that lauded the efforts of bringing faculty together and offered concrete suggestions for future contacts that included faculty exchanges and disciplinary discussions about syllabi and texts. Perhaps the most reflective and informative response came from a non-CCP faculty member who found the seminar valuable and said: "Like that of most teachers, I suspect, my professional life is rather insular: except for the occasional visit to a colleague's class (usually for the formal purposes of evaluation) and for my interaction with colleagues on committees, I see little of the work that goes on around me." Referring to a comment by one of the seminar participants who remarked that he rarely knew what was happening in the classroom next door, let alone in another college across the city, he continued: "The seminar helped alleviate my ignorance. The most helpful sessions were those in which we got down to specific cases: How should an introductory course in a discipline be taught? What should be taught in such a course? How should an examination or writing assignment for such a course be constructed? The discussions on these issues started me thinking not only about my own pedagogical practices but about the sorts of practices that would facilitate 'articulation' between our respective schools, thereby ensuring their health and growth." The Ford Foundation could not have said it better!

The end of the seminar meant the beginning of the academic summer. Any meaningful second-year effort would have to await the fall semester. But enough suggestions had been placed on the table at the last session that the notion of setting up a committee across the colleges to consider future steps was suggested and approved. The composition of the group remained vague, as did any time frame for future meetings. Nevertheless, a crucial first step had been taken. Whatever shape the second year might take, one could at least build upon a now existing foundation. A week of discussions had produced a welcome climate for continued dialogue.

**Continuing The Process: The Second Year**

During the summer of 1989, the Dean and I discussed the possibility of my continuing a coordinating role in the second year. My experience in working with faculty from other institutions had been so rewarding that I did little soul-searching. My only concern was how to structure a second year. I wished for a road map that, as far as I knew, did not exist. It seemed impractical to have an exact repeat of the summer experience unless one were dealing with a totally new set of faculty. To do that, however, would be to ignore the solid foundation of enthusiastic faculty now in place. In conversations with a number of people from all three schools, there was general agreement that the "larger" conversation was over and that more specific discussions according to departments or disciplines would be more meaningful. This would offer an opportunity for others to join some of the original participants.

Selecting those disciplines for continued discussion was not difficult. The science faculty from Temple, LaSalle and CCP had met during the summer and had established an ongoing relationship. The historians had agreed to swap syllabi and assignments for future get-togethers. It seemed logical to go with the personnel in place and use monies for additional stipends in those areas more in need of faculty "infusion." Transfer issues could not be discussed absent math or English; likewise, the issue of sequencing of courses in the social sciences made their inclusion imperative. All three areas needed additional faculty, as did the foreign languages which were not involved in the summer discussions but were added as part of the second-year effort. My task was to find additional faculty, convene the six disciplinary groups, shepherd their discussions and, together with them, plan a two-day conference for spring 1990 that would invite faculty from other two- and four-year schools to join the process. I was convinced that we had a good product to market--faculty dialogue about classroom teaching.

Expanding the disciplinary groups proved more difficult than I had anticipated. For the discussions to be fruitful, it was necessary to involve faculty with a strong commitment to teaching on the introductory level. Many faculty at the four-year schools made it very clear that their particular interests involved upper level courses only; moreover, that research and publication, and not good teaching, were tickets for tenure and promotion. This "disincentive" for discussions concerning the nature of introductory courses made the identification and selection of additional participants more challenging and time-consuming. At the same time, an ability to build upon the previous year's experience and the successful summer workshop enabled me to better articulate what it was we were trying to do.

I returned to my "deep throat" sources at Temple and LaSalle, indicating those disciplines for which I needed names. Contacts were made, appointments scheduled, and conversations held. From my

perspective, these discussions proved more substantive and fulfilling. I trotted out the project's history and indicated our interest in focusing in on particular disciplines then involved in general studies reform at CCP. My pitch to prospective faculty was simple--what happened to students in introductory courses often determined whether they would ever take another course in that discipline. Teaching upper level undergraduates or graduate students was to teach captive audiences who were there by choice. The challenge in higher education was to provide a meaningful experience for students in introductory courses whether or not they ever took another course in that discipline.

**The Working Groups**

By the end of the fall 1989 semester, six working groups were in place. There were now some forty faculty members from the three institutions prepared to sit around and discuss what they did in their courses and why. Since their discussions would shape the spring conference, it seemed imperative that I attend every meeting of each group in order to have any sense of the overall direction of the project. Anyone involved in academia will appreciate the problem of convening faculty from three schools across a variety of teaching schedules. Each group had a designated chair for purposes of scheduling and organizing, and it was my hope that each group could meet once before the spring semester began. That proved possible in some cases, but not all.

In calculating the number and length of meetings (an average of five meetings per discipline for two hours each), I now realize that I spent some sixty hours listening to a broad range of faculty talk about educational issues. My function at the meetings was to take notes and to keep each group generally informed about the nature of the discussions among the other disciplines. When appropriate, I would chime in with some comment or question which frequently reflected my ignorance of the discipline. More often, especially at the initial group meetings, I spent much time fending off questions about the scheduled conference for later in the spring. Faculty wanted to know what it was they were supposed to be doing in preparation, and I kept insisting that they not worry about that, for the agenda would emerge from their conversations. I'm not sure I really believed that, and I know I felt horribly uncomfortable that I couldn't specify, in detail, what the conference sessions would be about. I understood their frustration and recognized their concern about appearing unprofessional in the eyes of colleagues from other institutions. However, my primary concern was to make sense out of a bunch of meetings and to pray that some general direction would emerge.

Attending each session of every group proved more intellectually stimulating than anything I had done in many years. It is one thing to sit around and talk with one's colleagues; it is another to engage in conversation with people from other institutions. I felt privileged to have an opportunity to hear faculty outside of my own discipline of history

discuss issues of concern in their respective disciplines. More importantly, I became increasingly aware that the faculty engaged in this process really cared about teaching and were anxious to share and learn successful classroom strategies. To be sure, the process worked more successfully in some groups than in others, and each group developed a distinct dynamic that determined how productive the discussions would be. In retrospect, those groups remaining virtually intact from the initial phase had a tremendous advantage over those disciplines that were new to the process or that had been radically reshaped. In the latter instance, faculty had to become familiar with one another and experience all the preliminary steps that others had been through.

Some general observations about the composition and concerns of the disciplinary groups might prove helpful in understanding some of the dynamics at work. The largest group, the social sciences, should have been smaller. In trying to cover a number of disciplines from the three schools, I sacrificed a "neater" and more focused format for discussion. With eleven members, it was impossible for everyone to attend every meeting, and it became more difficult for the group to pick up at the next meeting where they had left off at the previous one. Still, despite the size and complexity of the category, faculty did engage in rather heated discussion about syllabi, the nature of exams and writing assignments, appropriate reading materials, and whether non-majors should be exposed to decidedly different psychology or sociology or political science courses. Overall, much time was spent deciding what commonality bound the social sciences and how each institution defined what constituted the discipline.

Another large, and relatively new, working group constituted English faculty. Nowhere was the distinction between the two- and four-year schools more clearly drawn. At CCP, English faculty are fortunate to teach college-level composition courses; at four-year schools, faculty count the number of literature courses on their semester schedule. Community college faculty, out of necessity, have to be more creative and concerned about introductory-level courses, for upper level courses are rare. The English faculty also shared assignments and spent much time debating whether or not there was anything to debate about the writing process. Much time was also spent discussing the appropriateness of using literary readings in composition courses, and in critiquing syllabi from CCP team taught courses linking composition with a history content course. The English faculty, more than most, seemed concerned about where they might be at "conference time." I continued to counsel patience as my anxiety level grew.

Foreign language faculty had not been involved in the first year of the Ford grant. Each institution had two representatives, most of whom seemed to know one another. I quickly realized that foreign language folk have their own local network in the Philadelphia area, and any concern I might have had about integrating this group into the process vanished

immediately. I had trouble keeping my note-taking up to speed with the nonstop conversation. No group seemed more desirous and appreciative of the opportunity for conversation with others in their field. There was a sense of inclusion that seemed particularly important given their perception of how they were regarded at their own institutions. The notion that foreign languages were simply a service category for history or the social sciences was not all that different from how mathematicians felt others viewed their discipline in "service" terms. In any case, the foreign language discussions covered the gamut from definitions of proficiency and what the term means to the nature of the consumer market for language instruction. That languages had cultural components and that changing geopolitics should shape language instruction provided a vehicle for discussing content linkages with other courses. Finally, the placement implications for transfer students and the desirability for developing standardized placement exams across the three schools was left as unfinished business.

The three other working groups had a different history. The historians were the same six who attended the first conference and had been in touch swapping syllabi and assignments during the fall of 1989. Getting together was like old home week, and everyone had a sense of where everyone else was coming from. Most of the discussions centered around the nature of introductory courses and whether they should be "information driven" or stress critical thinking and analysis through use of primary documents. The direction at CCP had been to emphasize primary documents long before the general studies effort, but this appeared to be in sharp contrast to the practices at Temple and LaSalle. This clear division seemed an appropriate issue to invite other historians to discuss in a conference session. That, and whether history belonged appropriately in the social sciences or the humanities, occupied most of the discussion.

The natural and physical sciences team were also holdovers. Their contact had continued beyond the initial summer meeting and needed little to stimulate continued dialogue. Much of the focus in the sciences fell on sequencing, or making sure that students had a sufficient information base to move on to the next level of biology or chemistry or physics. But what of the non-science major who might have only one science course? This became the primary topic for discussion. The debate ranged over whether a general science course could be constructed that incorporated a number of sciences. The participants left one session intent on devising one, but concluded they couldn't. They then began talking in terms of individual science courses and sketched out what the components of a course in physics or biology might look like for non-majors. Their bottom-line questions seemed to be: What does it mean to be scientifically literate in today's world? What conceptual scientific framework does the average citizen need to make judicious decisions about allocating shrinking financial resources? The science

faculty communicated outside of the meetings, and have forged a working relationship that already has transcended this process.

Mathematics has always been the most mysterious of disciplines to me, and, therefore, I found the discussions of this group the most entertaining and fascinating. This was the smallest group (one from each institution) and probably reflected the struggle within the discipline to rethink how general mathematics should be taught. From the beginning, the issue was clearly stated. How necessary was a working knowledge of algebra for a non-math major and how many times should a general studies student be forced to repeat the course? As the scientists asked about scientific literacy, so the math faculty raised the same issue about their field. What mathematics did the average citizen need to function effectively? And equally important, how does one teach mathematics in order to counteract the general dread the average student feels about the subject? Faculty members worked on their "dream" courses that could be given in an ideal world without regard to sequencing, and discussions were held about the possible evolution of a math course for non-majors that all three institutions could buy into. The very discussion signaled an important breakthrough in faculty collaboration.

**Expanding The Discussion**

The resulting conference, held at Community College of Philadelphia on April 20th and 21st, was entitled, "Broadening Curricula: Faculty Dialogue Across Two- and Four-Year Colleges and Universities." Some one hundred and fifty faculty from across Pennsylvania participated in disciplinary discussions shaped by the working faculty committees. Each developed its own strategy for bringing others into the conversation, some by deliberate provocation and others by reporting on the results of their labor. As I reviewed the titles of the workshops (too numerous to list in the body of this paper), I was struck by how faithful they were to the conversations that had transpired in those spring meetings. My belief that the working groups would have to find their own level and shape the agenda, accordingly, proved fairly accurate. Certainly some had an easier time than others in deciding on topics for appropriate discussion, and that mirrored to some extent how well the participants in a group liked one another and were able to work together. From my perspective, the fact that forty faculty members spent a semester working together across institutions on curriculum issues related to transfer and were still on friendly speaking terms at the end was little short of miraculous.

The conference marked the end of my second year working with the Ford grant. I've perused the evaluations returned by the conference participants and offer the following observations. Faculty welcomed the opportunity to meet and discuss with others the state of teaching in their discipline. At many institutions faculty have no opportunity for dialogue, let alone with faculty from other schools. Some present at the sessions organized their own network for future exchanges of ideas and for

development of "common ground." Many commented how helpful it was to have a forum for airing problems related to their discipline, and for hearing how others might address them. The science faculty wanted additional discussions on courses for non-majors, and others lamented that no time had been set aside for having joint meetings among the disciplinary groups since so much emphasis had been placed on interdisciplinary studies, particularly by CCP faculty. There was consensus that those sessions that worked best were the most structured topically, and the more open-ended the topic the more likelihood for general meandering. Finally, faculty from four-year schools admitted that much needed to be done in tracking transfer students after matriculation, and that little currently exists to help transfers acculturate to their changed environment.

A feeling of relief overwhelmed me at the end of the conference. It was over! More than that, people seemed genuinely pleased that a forum had been found for discussing issues related to teaching in the classroom. There is comfort in knowing that one is not alone, and that the frustrations one has are widely shared. But there was a more important message that came out of this enterprise: that many faculty have shared concerns about curriculum design and teaching strategies and that they are anxious to talk with others. That whether one teaches at a two- or four-year institution is in the long run irrelevant once discussions begin, and that any initial elitism felt by four-year faculty is quickly dissipated. Hopefully, this process will herald the beginning of a process that, with adequate funding, will enable more faculty to become active participants.

Two years have passed since that phone call from the Dean that would so affect my professional life. For the first time I had a chance to look beyond CCP and view a wider world of new colleagues with different things to say. I said many times that I felt especially fortunate to have been asked and glad that I was bright enough to accept. Yes, I had doubts along the way, and not every experience was an uplifting one. But I wouldn't have missed it for anything!

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